

*United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

# ***MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES***

**COMMANDERS-IN-CHIEF OF THE AMERICAN WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE  
A Leadership Study of George Washington and Sir William Howe**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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**MAJOR HAYDN JOHN WHITE, ROYAL MARINES**

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**Mentor: DR DONALD F BITTNER, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY**

**Approved:**

**Date:**

**Mentor: LIEUTENANT COLONEL HENK. DE JAGER, ROYAL MARINES**

**Approved:**

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**Abstract**

Leadership is an intensely studied subject, and a considerable number of models exist. By reviewing four leadership theories, two German, one British, and one American, a model developed that contained the enduring interrelated tenets of courage, judgment, determination, integrity, vision, and luck. George Washington displayed considerable ability in all these. He had tremendous courage both in battle and in his conviction of a victorious outcome of the war. His judgment above the tactical level was exceptional, and, from limited resources, he developed a standing army and a defensive military strategy, both of which became the cornerstone of victory. He continually frustrated the British. Throughout all the stresses of the war, Washington remained a man of integrity while pursuing a vision of a free and fair republic. His lack of resources forced him to be unconventional. This he achieved by seeking out as much information as possible, so that every favorable opportunity could be exploited and every unfavorable one avoided. William Howe displayed a limited ability in all the aforementioned tenets. Although brave, he lacked the moral conviction required to prosecute an aggressive military campaign. His tactical judgment was good, if ponderous, but he failed to develop this into operational or strategic success. In particular, he failed to focus to destroy Washington's army. Consequently, his efforts lacked tenacity, and he became distracted while showing limited integrity by setting a poor example. His focus became purely his army, rather than his area of responsibility as a whole. His limited vision was consistently complicated by his dual role as both military leader and diplomat, and he failed to address either with vigor. His frustration saw him use slow and conventional tactics which were unsuited to the circumstances, while he consistently failed to exploit his opportunities.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Title:** Commanders-in-Chief of the American War for Independence:  
A leadership study of George Washington and Sir William Howe

**Author:** Major Haydn. J. White, Royal Marines

**Thesis:** The leadership of George Washington and Sir William Howe had a significant impact on the formative years of the American War for Independence. As Commanders-in-Chief between 1775 and 1778, what were the characteristics of their leadership, and how did this effect the prosecution of the war?

**Discussion:** Leadership is an intensely studied subject, and a considerable number of models exist. By reviewing four leadership theories, two German, one British, and one American, a model developed that contained the enduring interrelated tenets of courage, judgment, determination, integrity, vision, and luck.

George Washington displayed considerable ability in all these. He had tremendous courage both in battle and in his conviction of a victorious outcome of the war. His judgment above the tactical level was exceptional, and, from limited resources, he developed a standing army and a defensive military strategy, both of which became the cornerstone of victory. He continually frustrated the British. Throughout all the stresses of the war, Washington remained a man of integrity while pursuing a vision of a free and fair republic. His lack of resources forced him to be unconventional. This he achieved by seeking out as much information as possible, so that every favorable opportunity could be exploited and every unfavorable one avoided.

William Howe displayed a limited ability in all the aforementioned tenets. Although brave, he lacked the moral conviction required to prosecute an aggressive military campaign. His tactical judgment was good, if ponderous, but he failed to develop this into operational or strategic success. In particular, he failed to focus to destroy Washington's army. Consequently, his efforts lacked tenacity, and he became distracted while showing limited integrity by setting a poor example. His focus became purely his army, rather than his area of responsibility as a whole. His limited vision was consistently complicated by his dual role as both military leader and diplomat, and he failed to address either with vigor. His frustration saw him use slow and conventional tactics which were unsuited to the circumstances, while he consistently failed to exploit his opportunities.

**Conclusion:** Leadership has common interrelated tenets. Washington consistently demonstrated sound to good ability in all these areas, whereas Howe consistently demonstrated mediocre to poor ability. The areas of particular strength for Washington were those of particular weakness for Howe. This allowed an army of limited resources to consistently frustrate the British and keep the revolution alive.

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## **PREFACE**

As a Royal Marine, military leadership has always fascinated me. Furthermore, attending the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College as the only United Kingdom representative has stimulated my interest in the leaders of the American War for Independence. This was an intriguing conflict in which a relatively small and newly raised American force managed to sustain, and eventually win, the fight against the largest army the British had ever deployed. The names of the American leaders live on, particularly that of George Washington; however, the names of many of the British commanders have been consigned to the history books. I therefore decided to conduct a leadership case study of the period, comparing the American Commander-in Chief, George Washington, to perhaps the best known British Commander, Sir William Howe. As a tool for analysis a leadership model was constructed by reviewing four theories, and from these creating a model to apply to the two commanders. This application was focussed specifically on their military leadership during the period from the commencement of hostilities in April 1775 to Sir William Howe's resignation in May 1778.

A considerable amount has been written about leadership, the American War for Independence, and the commanders concerned. The sources used for this study were all secondary, mainly 20<sup>th</sup> century biographical works and studies of the war. Ultimately, Washington's leadership compared well to the model whereas Howe's did not. Furthermore, the strengths and weaknesses of the two individuals combined to set the conditions in which the colonial revolutionaries could sustain their cause and eventually prove victorious.

Several individuals have assisted me with this project. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the work of Dr. Donald F. Bittner and Lieutenant Colonel Henk de Jager, RM, for their guidance

as my faculty mentors. I would also like to thank Dr. Jack Matthews, who's elective on the American War helped stimulate my interest which I have no doubt will remain with me for life.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Leadership Defined**

#### **Introduction**

The American War of Independence (1775 – 1783) was a conflict in which one of the greatest military powers in the world was defeated by a few million scattered, inadequately armed, and badly trained colonials.<sup>1</sup> The military leadership of the opposing forces also had a different pedigree. For the colonies, George Washington, one of Virginia's representatives to the second Continental Congress, was quickly appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army - a position he held until the war's end.<sup>2</sup> For the British, the Commander-in-Chief changed three times, but perhaps the commander who had the greatest impact was Sir William Howe, who held the position from 16 Oct 1775 until the acceptance of his resignation in May 1778.<sup>3</sup> During the first three years of the war, the leadership of these two commanders had a considerable impact on campaigns from the tactical to the strategic levels, and set the tone for the war's remaining years including its eventual outcome.

This paper will analyze the leadership of George Washington and Sir William Howe. It will focus on their military leadership, specifically in their roles as Commanders-in-Chief from the summer 1775 to the spring of 1778. As a tool of analysis, a leadership model will be constructed by reviewing four historical and contemporary leadership theories: two German, one British, and one American. This model will then be applied to both Washington and Howe.

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Shy, A People Numerous & Armed (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 215. This work also provides a good overview to the causes, development, and legacy of the American War for Independence.

<sup>2</sup> For a biography of Washington, see James T. Flexnor Washington the Indispensable Man (New York: New American Library, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> For a biography of Howe, see Ira D. Gruber The Howe Brothers (New York: The Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg 1972).

Finally, a direct comparison will be conducted to determine the effect of their leadership on the outcome of the conflict.

### **Leadership Defined**

Military leadership has been defined as the process of influencing others to accomplish an endstate by providing purpose, direction, and motivation.<sup>4</sup> Good leadership has a considerable impact on the effectiveness of a military organization and, as such, it is a much-studied medium. Arguments continue as to whether leaders are born or made; however, notwithstanding such debate, it is generally agreed that leadership is the harmonious combination of a number of characteristics, traits, and tenets that together form the individuality and personality of a leader.

To identify these tenets, and to construct a model to apply to Washington and Howe, four theories will be reviewed. These span three centuries from three countries, and will reflect the timeless qualities of leadership, rather than those elements that can be considered contextual.

### **Carl von Clausewitz**

The first of these is from the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his work *On War*.<sup>5</sup> Leadership is one recurring theme throughout the book, and he writes specifically on the subject in the chapter titled *On Military Genius*. Clausewitz's use of the word genius is often synonymous with leadership, particularly when applied to the attributes that make a successful leader. He wrote, "Genius consists in a harmonious combination of elements in which one or the other ability may predominate but none may be in conflict with the rest."<sup>6</sup>

Clausewitz detailed four central tenets that he believed should be present in a leader or

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<sup>4</sup> The United States Army, *FM 22-100 – Military Leadership* (Washington DC: 1990),1.

<sup>5</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 100.

military genius, and a number of associated sub-tenets. These are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<b>Carl Von Clausewitz from <i>On War</i></b>	
<b>Central tenets of leadership</b>	<b>Sub-tenets of leadership</b>
Courage	Physical courage Moral Courage
Coup d’oeil	Not applicable
Determination	Not applicable
Strength of Character	Energy Staunchness Self Control

Clausewitz believed that the first tenet necessary in a leader must be **courage**. He states, “War is the realm of danger; therefore courage is the soldier’s first requirement.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he differentiated between two kinds of courage: “courage to face personal danger,” which can be termed physical courage, and “courage to accept responsibility,” which can be termed moral courage.

The second tenet of leadership was a more abstract concept, one which he described using the French expression *Coup d’oeil*. This is difficult to define, although Clausewitz writes of it being “an intellect that even in the darkest hour retains some glimmerings of the inner-light which leads to truth.”<sup>8</sup> He goes on to further define his thoughts, and develops this tenet as an ability to make quick and accurate decisions by being able to visualize time and space. Although this is most obviously applicable to the tactical level and the ability of a commander to feel the pulse of battle, it also has application at the higher levels of warfare and an ability to make correct and timely decisions. Put more simply, it is a feel for the battle or campaign.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 102.

Clausewitz's third tenet is **determination** or “ the courage to follow faint light wherever it may lead.”<sup>9</sup> He closely relates determination to courage, and regards determination as intellectual fortitude. Significantly, he stresses that determination is not obstinacy. Rather, it is to strive for what is correct and not to pursue what is obviously wrong. Clausewitz does, however, recognize that determination also applies to a propensity for “daring, pugnacity, boldness or temerity.”<sup>10</sup>

The final central tenet of leadership for Clausewitz is that of **strength of character**. Here he subdivides this element into three sub-tenets, namely energy, staunchness, and self-control. He believed that to have strength of character, an individual requires the energy both to cope with the physical and mental rigors of war, but also to be vibrant and to instill vibrancy in others. Staunchness, within strength of character, is closely linked to determination and “the will's resistance to a single blow.”<sup>11</sup> The final sub-tenet is self-control and specifically the ability to remain calm and logical under great stress. Notably, when Clausewitz discusses strength of character, he goes to some length to make it clear that strength of character can degenerate into obstinacy, hence individuals must guard against this.

### **Major General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven**

The second leadership theorist is Major General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven. During his early career, Loringhoven served in the Russian Army and then transferred to the German Army (Prussian Guards) in 1878. During his life he wrote fifteen books on various military subjects. On the subject of leadership, his primary work was *The Power of Personality in War*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 102

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 103

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 105

written in 1911.<sup>12</sup> Throughout it, he frequently cites Clausewitz whilst simultaneously developing his own ideas. Unlike Clausewitz, he does not specifically identify the tenets that combine to make a good leader; rather, he discusses different leadership characteristics under specific chapter headings, and in each one he analyses leadership and identifies its sub-tenets. Table two contains the chapter headings and associated sub-tenets.

**Table 2**

<b>Major General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven from <i>The Power of Personality In War</i></b>	
<b>Chapter Heading</b>	<b>Associated leadership tenets and sub-tenets</b>
War is the Domain of Danger	Physical courage Morale courage Optimism Sense the pulse of battle
War is the domain of physical exertion and suffering	Personal example
War is the domain of friction	Strong will
War is the domain of uncertainty	Luck Creative thought
The Commander must have imagination	Creative thought
Ambition is one of the essential qualities of a leader	Vision
Only a strong mind can resist the impressions of war	Resilience
No one can be a leader without strength of character	Acceptance of responsibility Determination
The essence of military personality	Judged by result

In his first chapter, Loringhoven paraphrases Clausewitz by stating that “war is the domain of danger” and therefore **courage** is necessary. He then endorses Clausewitz’s views that courage can be subdivided into physical courage and moral courage. Furthermore, to instill confidence into subordinates, a leader’s courageous actions must be overt and visible on the

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<sup>12</sup> Major General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven, *The Power of Personality in War* (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Company, 1955).

battlefield. It is by a leader positioning himself on the battlefield that he will be able to feel the pulse of battle and influence it accordingly. This latter view can be related to the tenet that Clausewitz termed *Coup d'oeil*.

Loringhoven next discusses war as the domain of physical exertion and suffering, again a paraphrase of Clausewitz. The leadership tenets he derives from this are essentially that of **physical and mental resilience**, an aspect that Clausewitz placed under strength of character. He also reiterates during this chapter the importance of leadership by example, stating “The Commander in Chief, of course, when it is possible, must visit the troops frequently and share their hardships, since his example will be of the utmost value.”<sup>13</sup>

Loringhoven continuously examines the leadership qualities necessary to overcome the friction and uncertainty of war, and develops this theme by discussing how the commander must be imbued with **imagination**. These points are closely related and it is not surprising that Loringhoven’s thoughts intertwine. He sees that a commander must be **strong willed** and **determined**, but also that a good leader must gain and learn from the experience of his mistakes. Based on this experience, Loringhoven believed that the good commander should apply **creative thought** to his judgement. From all of this, the relationship with Clausewitz’s *coup d'oeil* can again be derived. Loringhoven, however, makes a brief departure from Clausewitz by stating that an essential prerequisite of a leader is to have **ambition**. This is more than personal ambition, but first should encompass cause and country. A modern term that would encapsulate this would be that of being visionary by having a preconceived endstate.

Fretag-Loringhoven then returns to Clausewitzian themes. He discusses how only a strong mind can resist the impressions of war, and that a leader should have **strength of**

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 50.

**character.** Essentially his thoughts resemble those of Clausewitz, and he reiterates that strength of character should not equate to stubbornness, again an echo of the famous Prussian theorist.

In his final chapter, Loringhoven discusses the essence of military personality, which he concludes is a harmonious blend of all the tenets that weave throughout his work. Ultimately however, a leader can only be judged by results – especially his success on the battlefield.

### **Field Marshal Viscount Slim**

The penultimate military theory to be reviewed was that provided by British Field Marshal Viscount Slim in a lecture to the United States Army War College at Fort Leavenworth in 1953.<sup>14</sup> Many of these ideas are also in his memoir *Defeat into Victory*.<sup>15</sup> Field Marshal Slim was a truly exceptional leader. He commanded at every level from section to army group, and eventually retired as Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten, who was Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia during the Second World War, described him as “The finest general World War Two produced.”<sup>16</sup>

During his lecture, Slim stated that leadership consisted of example, persuasion, and compulsion, and that it comprised five central tenets. He then detailed associated sub-tenets as noted in Table 3. The first tenet for Slim was **willpower**, which he believed had four derivatives: Courage in both its forms, the ability to identify and focus on an objective, and the determination to ensure that it is achieved. Within this tenet, Slim offers no new insight into leadership, but endorses the views of Clausewitz and Loringhoven in that courage and determination are key foundation tenets. Of interest is the sub-tenet of “focusing on your objective”, which relates to

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<sup>14</sup> The lecture was developed into a documentary by Major Benjamin G. Wyatt, USMC. This was done as a research project for the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College in academic year 1993/94. It is titled “Higher Command” and held in the archives of the Marine Corps Research Center, Quantico, Virginia.

<sup>15</sup> Field Marshal Viscount William J Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (New York: D Makay, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> Frank Owen, “*Slim of Burma*,” Under the keyword “General Slim,” Accessed on Thrall, 06 January 2001.

Loringhoven's view that a leader must have ambition.

**Table 3**

<b>Field Marshall The Viscount Slim Lecture at Fort Leavenworth – 1953 Leadership = Example, Persuasion, and Compulsion</b>	
<b>Central tenets of leadership</b>	<b>Sub tenets of leadership</b>
Willpower	Determination Focus on your objective Morale courage Physical courage
Judgment	Ability to make a decision Ability to select
Flexibility of mind	Knowledge of yourself Knowledge of your own forces Knowledge of the enemy Knowledge of the enemy commander
Integrity	Self-explanatory
Luck	Self-explanatory

Secondly, a successful leader required good **judgment**, with sub-tenets of the ability to make a decision and to select courses of action and subordinates. Here he focuses on the importance of experience, and how it relates to decision making. Specifically, Slim believed that leadership involves the talent to assimilate information and, by combining it with experience, make timely and sound decisions. Equally, he believed that a good leader should apply this judgment process to the selection of individuals to fulfil key roles within an organization. Without this ability, the organization and therefore the leader are likely to fail. Slim, however, provides a caveat to this; he cautions against an individual taking his staff with him on promotion as this may weaken the previous command.

Next is **flexibility of mind**. This is obviously closely linked to judgment, particularly with regard to the assimilation and good use of information. Furthermore, Slim believed that to have flexibility of mind a commander must have a good knowledge of oneself and one's own



forces, as well as that of the enemy commander and his forces. Although neither Clausewitz nor Loringhoven discuss this specifically, the metaphor used by Clausewitz that war is a large-scale duel and his further analogy of competing wrestlers certainly points to the necessity of a leader having an intimate knowledge of his opponent.

**Integrity** is the fourth tenet of Slim's concept. He quite simply believed that a good leader must be true to himself, and do what he believes is right in all circumstances. He particularly stressed looking after the troops, and wrote, "I tell you therefore that as officers you will neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, nor smoke nor even sit down until you have personally seen that your men have done those things. If you do this for them they will follow you to the end of the world."<sup>17</sup>

The final element of leadership for Slim was **luck**, which was not a specified tenet or sub-tenet of Clausewitz or Loringhoven. It would also appear out of place in a leadership model until it is further defined as being more than just being a victim of good or bad circumstance. Slim defined luck as deriving from a combination of knowledge, skill, and experience, all applied to a given situation and thus creating favorable circumstances. With this formula added, a similarity can certainly be seen with Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil* and Loringhoven's creative thought.

### **FM 22-100 Military Leadership**

The final and most contemporary leadership theory is that detailed in the United States Army FM 22 –100 (*Military Leadership*).<sup>18</sup> This lists eleven principles, all of which are detailed in Table 4.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The United States Army , FM 22-100 – Military Leadership (Washington DC: 1990),1.

**Table 4**

<b>FM – 22-100 Military Leadership The Principles of Leadership</b>
Know yourself and seek self improvement
Be technically and tactically proficient
Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions
Make sound and timely decisions
Set the example
Know your soldiers and look out for their well being
Keep your subordinates informed
Develop a sense of responsibility in your subordinates
Ensure the task is understood, supervised and accomplished
Build the team
Employ your unit in accordance with its capabilities

This is by far the most descriptive, detailed, and specific leadership model of those reviewed. It is also written so that it has utility throughout the entire rank structure. As it is so prescriptive, it requires little explanation. However, to provide it with greater commonality with the previously reviewed theories, benefit is derived by grouping the prescriptive principles under previously used tenets or sub-tenets. This process is done in Table 5.

**Table 5**

<b>United States Army Field Manual 22-100 Military Leadership</b>	
<b>Principles</b>	<b>Associated tenet</b>
Know yourself and seek self improvement	Flexibility of mind
Be technically and tactically proficient	Integrity
Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions	Courage
Make sound and timely decisions	Judgment
Set the example	Courage
Know your soldiers and look out for their well being	Integrity
Keep your subordinates informed	Integrity
Develop a sense of responsibility in your subordinates	Integrity
Ensure the task is understood, supervised and accomplished	Willpower
Build the team	Judgment
Employ your unit in accordance with its capabilities	Flexibility of Mind

The above four leadership theories provide a comprehensive base from which to develop a working model. To do this, the reoccurring themes will be amalgamated under generic terms. Table 6 details this. The developed model therefore contains **six tenets** that should result in successful leadership. Firstly, **courage**, subdivided into physical and moral courage. This is the ability to disregard fear without being reckless, and the ability to act on one's beliefs. It could be argued that in the modern era physical courage could be absent from a leadership model, however warfare during the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a far more personal affair which required physical courage on the battlefield. The second tenet of the model is **judgment**. Specifically, the judgment to make sound and timely decisions based on experience and available information in both slow and fast moving situations. Furthermore, this decision making must be at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The fact that an individual may make a poor judgment from inexperience is less important than that the judgment in the future is better for it. The third tenet is that of **determination**; this is firmness of purpose for self and cause, and should reflect a resoluteness in adversity. The fourth tenet is **integrity**, and involves a moral uprightness and honesty to the accepted practice of the time. The penultimate tenet is **vision**; although not completely divorced from personal ambition, its primary attribute is a preconceived endsate. The final tenet is that of **luck**. This is less circumstantial, but rather the favorable circumstance developed by the application of experience, knowledge, perception and skill.

**Table 6**

<b>The Developed Leadership Model</b>	
<b>Theorists</b>	<b>Working Model</b>
Clausewitz –Courage Loringhoven –War is the domain of danger Slim – Willpower FMFM – Seek and take responsibility for your actions FMFM – Set the example	Courage
Clausewitz – Judgment Loringhoven – War is the domain of uncertainty Slim – Judgment FMFM- Make sound and timely decisions	Judgment
Clausewitz – Determination Loringhoven –War is the domain of physical exertion and suffering Loringhoven – Only a strong mind can resist the impressions of war Slim – Willpower FMFM – Ensure the task is understood, supervised and accomplished	Determination
Clausewitz -Fortitude of character Loringhoven –No one can lead without strength of character Slim –Integrity FMFM – Know yourself and seek self improvement FMFM – Know your soldiers and look out for their well being	Integrity
Clausewitz –Energy Loringhoven- Ambition is one of the essential qualities of a leader Slim – Willpower (Focus on objective) FMFM- Not applicable	Vision
Clausewitz - <i>Coup d’oeil</i> Loringhoven –The commander must have imagination Slim – Luck FMFM – Not applicable	Luck

The developed model therefore contains six fundamental tenets. It is not just their presence that will ensure good military leadership, but also that there is a harmonious blend and one that is applicable to the prevailing circumstances. How therefore, did the actions of Washington and Howe compare with the model?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The Leadership of Washington**

*A people unused to restraint must be led, they will not be drove, even those who  
are engaged(sic) for the War, must be disciplined by degrees.<sup>1</sup>  
General George Washington, January 1777*

Washington's words in January 1777 came at a time when his goal of America as a new and free republic must have been a very distant vision. He was fighting perhaps the most powerful colonial power in the world, his war effort was deficient in both men and materiel, and even the support of the people vacillated. Was it therefore the leadership of Washington that turned the course of the war so that victory and ultimately American Independence could be gained?

### **Early Life**

George Washington was born on 22 February 1732 to a relatively prosperous Virginian farming family. His formal education was limited, and much of this consisted of home tutoring by his father and brother. His early work was as a surveyor, which broadened his experience of the middle Atlantic region northern territories. During the French and Indian War (1754-1763) he held a commission in the Virginia militia and led a number of expeditions into the western territories. Here he gained his first experience of battle, and of particular note was that gained while accompanying Major General Edward Braddock's expedition of 1755. During it, the British force was ambushed and Braddock mortally wounded at the battle of the Monongahela on 8 July. During the ensuing battle and British withdrawal, Washington was noted for his bravery and leadership in rallying and organizing the British force. By 1758 he had been promoted to command the Virginia militia and with a force of 700 militiamen accompanied General John Forbes expedition to the upper Ohio river valley. Washington was, however, critical of the

operation's methodology, and when it was successful he became disheartened. Prior to the end of hostilities, he resigned his commission and returned to his home at Mount Vernon.

Washington subsequently became disenchanted with British rule, particularly commercial restrictions and taxation. In 1759 he was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses, and in 1767 with other colonial leaders he supported the establishment of a Continental Congress to manage the collective interests of the thirteen colonies. Such a congress was established, and for its second sitting in 1774 Washington was elected as one of the representatives from Virginia. After the battles of Lexington and Concord on 19 April 1775, and with the New England militia besieging the British forces in Boston, the Second Continental Congress met. Strikingly, Washington arrived in military uniform. At the meeting, congress assumed control of the forces at Boston and thereby created the first continental army. It also unanimously elected Washington as its commander, the position he held throughout the war.

### **Courage**

Washington's reputation as a man of physical courage was well known after his experiences in the French and Indian War, and was undoubtedly a factor in his selection to lead the Continental Army.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the early war years of the Revolutionary War he constantly sustained this reputation for bravery. George Billias in his work George Washington's Generals and Opponents stated, "To begin with he was personally brave. In the fighting on Manhattan in September 1776, at Princeton the following January, and at Germantown in September 1777 he displayed conspicuous courage."<sup>3</sup> Such acts of courage frequently consisted of ensuring that he

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<sup>1</sup> Don Higginbotham, The War for American Independence, (New York: North Eastern Universities Press, 1983), 19.

<sup>2</sup> The French and Indian War (1756-1763) was the fourth and last war fought between Britain and France for mastery of the North American continent. In Europe it is frequently referred to as the Seven Years War.

<sup>3</sup> George A. Billias, Washington's Generals and Opponents (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 3.

was visible to the forward troop positions so that his presence and stoicism would act as an example. For instance, at the battle of Princeton in January 1777 Washington saw that the rebel advance was faltering; he therefore calmly rode to a position in full sight and range of the British muskets, turned his back on them, and waved the rebel line on. By so doing, he galvanized the Continentals into advancing to victory. Of course one could argue that such an act was inappropriate for a Commander-in-Chief, however, his was a relatively inexperienced force that occasionally required the use of unconventional methods. In this case they were successful, and Washington's physical courage cannot be questioned.

Washington's moral courage was also very evident from the outset of the war. His arrival at the meeting of the Congress on 10 May 1775 in military uniform clearly indicated his support to the actions at Lexington and Concord, and his own willingness to militarily lead the cause. Furthermore, on being appointed Commander-in-Chief, he determined that he would take no pay for his service but only that his expenses should be paid. Thomas G. Frothingham, in his work Washington as Commander in Chief quotes Washington during his acceptance speech as saying:

As to pay, Sir, I beg leave to assure the Congress that as no pecuniary consideration could have tempted me to accept this arduous employment at the expense of my domestic ease and happiness, I do not wish to make any profit from it. I will keep an exact account of my expenses. Those I doubt not they will discharge, and that is all I desire."<sup>4</sup>

Not only did this gesture indicate Washington's conviction to the cause by committing himself so fully at a time when the independence movement was still in its infancy, it also indicated his belief that the Colonials would triumph. The settling of accounts could be completed once victory had been achieved.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Frothingham, Washington-Commander-in-Chief (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), 51.

## **Judgment**

From the outset of his time in command there was considerable expectation as to how Washington would conduct the military campaign. Don Higginbotham in The War of American Independence stated, “Who better than the ex-colonel of Virginia militia knew the inability of untrained irregulars to withstand an open field engagement against European regulars? Who better than the former Tidewater planter understood the uphill task of gathering recruits in July and August, when men on the land were needed in their fields?”<sup>5</sup> However, such a pedigree provided little experience in waging war on the scale that Washington now addressed.

At the tactical level, the military campaign commenced well for Washington. He arrived in Boston to take command soon after the rebels had inflicted considerable casualties at the battle of Bunker Hill on 17 June 1775. Although the British were victorious by clearing rebels from their entrenchments, the engagement had exacted a heavy toll. Furthermore, it had proved that the Colonials were prepared to fight, and could do so albeit from prepared positions. The outcome of the battle was such that Washington, on hearing the news, stated, “the liberties of the country are safe!”<sup>6</sup> Although clearly premature, Washington knew that his army had survived its first engagement, and would fight. This perceived early success perhaps belied the scale of the military task, and early in the campaign Washington even considered sending his troops across the frozen Charles River in all-out attack against the British in Boston. He was dissuaded from doing so by a council of his generals, and his early exuberance soon tempered. In early 1776, Washington then suffered the tactical defeats of Long Island and Fort Mifflin, which resulted in the strategic loss of New York. These battles taught Washington the value of ground

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<sup>5</sup> Higginbotham, The War for American Independence, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Frothingham, Washington-Commander-in-Chief, 68.



to the commander: a force must not allow itself to be flanked and, secondly, even strongly fortified positions would succumb to overwhelming strength.

These tactical lessons transcended into an operational understanding that the Continental Army was crucial to success. Against popular opinion, particularly after the good showing of the militia and minutemen at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, Washington was very clear in his mind that to properly conduct the war more than militia units would be required. John Shy wrote in A people Numerous and Armed that, “from the outset, Washington said that the militia was worse than useless, and that the creation of a European style, long service, tightly disciplined force was essential.”<sup>7</sup> This judgement was remarkable and shows how Washington kept his composure and his ability for rational thought despite the militia’s early successes. He quickly recognized that to wage war against the British, he would need to develop a strategy of erosion of the enemy’s will, and to execute such a strategy would require a standing army with formalized training and recruiting.

Although Washington recognized the need for a standing army, he fully understood that he could not afford to have it decisively engaged by the British for fear of its destruction by a well trained professional army. The British also recognized this vulnerability with one officer stating that the continentals “would be less dangerous if they had a regular army.”<sup>8</sup> Important here is that Washington’s rationale was not to develop a standing army for the purpose of waging conventional force-on-force battles as he knew the British had better trained, equipped, and disciplined forces. The formation of the Continental Army was to provide a physical and symbolic focus for the revolutionary cause. It would replace the spontaneity of the

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<sup>7</sup> John W. Shy, A People Numerous & Armed, (Michigan: The University Press, 1990), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

minutemen with a disciplined, regular force which needed to be recruited, equipped, and trained. As well as a focus of the cause, such a force would enable Washington to conduct his strategy of erosion in order to destroy the British will at home and abroad and yet not get decisively engaged. This he expressed to the President of Congress in 1776 saying, “We should on all occasions avoid a general action or put anything at risk, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn.”<sup>9</sup> In essence, Washington within two years of taking command, had developed a national military strategy, namely that of the strategic defensive, and one which continued throughout the war.

### **Determination**

Washington’s determination never faltered throughout this period. Having established the importance of the Continental Army, it quickly became his focus. He, “hammered away at the task of creating an army officered by gentlemen, observing strict discipline, properly armed and accoutered, paid, rewarded, and punished.”<sup>10</sup> This was a mammoth task, particularly as the initiative was often with the British who for the majority of the war fared far better than the continentals in terms of men, materiel, and potential mobility. At times the mismatch appeared to make his position untenable. During the winter of 1776-1777, with his troops’ enlistments due to terminate, Washington commanded a Continental Army of less than 3,000 facing a British force of some 34,000, albeit that they were dispersed. Washington refused to capitulate, and masterminded the much-needed raid across the Delaware to attack the small British garrison of Hessians at Trenton. This came at a critical time for the cause, as Russel F. Weigly commented in the The American Way of War:

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<sup>9</sup> Billias, Washington’s Generals and Opponents, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 12.

The dramatic elimination of the Hessian garrison at Trenton, with the capture of most of it, produced the results Washington desired. It stimulated enlistments enough to prevent the evaporation of the army, and it inspired enough veteran soldiers to postpone their departure from the army to permit Washington to launch a second stroke across the Delaware into New Jersey. This second venture culminated in his crushing the British detachment at Princeton early in the new year, with further benefits both to enlistments and to American Morale.<sup>11</sup>

By dint of his personal determination, Washington had galvanized sufficient numbers of the American people to continue the struggle, albeit that others remained loyal to the crown or disinterested in taking sides. He never lost his focus or slackened his efforts to frustrate, if not always attack, the British. The primary focus of his determination was directed towards preserving his Continental Army and keeping a force in the field to facilitate his strategic defensive strategy, keep the revolutionary cause viable, and erode the British desire to pursue the war.

### **Integrity**

Washington was a man of considerable personal integrity. From the outset of his appointment as Commander-in-Chief, particularly with regard to his increase in status and authority as the war progressed, it is very difficult to find an example of when this power and privilege was abused. Billias writes, “though he had a high sense of his own authority, no scandal, financial or moral, attached to his name. If he kept a punctilious record of the expenses owed him by the United States, he took no pay for his services.”<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding this personal integrity, there were occasions when his actions showed his human side. He frequently criticized the performance of the “part-time soldiers of the

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<sup>11</sup> Russell F. Weigley, The American Way of War (New York: Indiana University Press, 1977), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Billias, Washington's Generals and Opponents, 4.

revolution” which, although justified, failed to recognize that on occasion they had fought well at such places as the battles of Cowpens and Kings Mountain. Furthermore, they were an effective tool for suppressing the Tories and on occasion provided augmentation to his standing force. Washington surely understood that, “the regular American army units were too thinly ranked and the theater of war too vast to avoid a heavy reliance upon the militia.”<sup>13</sup>

On occasion Washington also criticized the performance of the Continental Army, notwithstanding that he himself recognized that they were a poor match for the British. Furthermore, he was on occasion quick to apportion blame to a subordinate such as Nathaniel Greene after the loss of Fort Washington.<sup>14</sup> Such examples are minor and serve to show Washington’s human side in an intense and stressful environment.

At times it must have appeared to Washington that the future of the entire embryo country rested on his actions. Yet, he acted throughout with considerable integrity moulding the minimal assets he had into a cohesive and reasonably effective force. As Billias states:

One of Washington’s greatest attributes was his genius in the art of managing men. Although he could not inspire genuine affection among the rank and file because of a certain hauteur and coldness in personality, Washington had a profound effect upon the members of his official family. His ability to contend with jealous colleagues, to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of his subordinates, and to cope with misfits and malcontents enabled him to weld a few fellow officers into some semblance of a high command.<sup>15</sup>

### **Vision**

Once appointed to be Commander-in-Chief, Washington’s vision was always one of military victory to support the political goal of independence despite the overwhelming materiel

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Washington had given Greene a discretionary authority to evacuate his force from Fort Washington. It was not a directive order and therefore his actions to stay were not unjustified.

<sup>15</sup> Billias, Washington’s Generals and Opponents , xiii..

odds. His visionary genius centered on his understanding of power both military and political, and specifically the relationship between the two. To prosecute his national military strategy, Washington required a standing army that required funding, men, and materiel, and which required resourcing on a national level through taxation. To some, such requirements were not compatible with a revolutionary cause and were poorly dealt with by the immature Continental Congress. Rather than levy taxes, it recommended to the states that they make contributions and stipulated the amount. Washington, from the outset of his tenure, continually lobbied Congress to the effect that he should be given resources commensurate with his task, but he restrained himself from appealing outside the chain of command to the constituents. These actions were driven by his vision of a new republic free from the tyranny of a monarchy and oppressive army, and further serve as an example of his integrity. As the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, would write two centuries later, “Washington demonstrated to the world one of the cornerstones of free and democratic government: the military must remain subservient to civil authority.”<sup>16</sup> By these actions, Washington had established a template for the future by giving primacy to the Continental Congress and not to the army.

### **Luck**

Washington was skilled at manipulating situations to his advantage. After nearly allowing his force to be enveloped at Long Island, he quickly understood the importance of the selection of ground to the commander and studied it in detail. Equally, to properly prosecute his strategic defensive strategy, Washington required detailed information on the British forces. This task he conducted with great enthusiasm. As Russel Weigley writes:

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<sup>16</sup> David R Palmer Colin Powell, First In War, (Washington DC: The Mount Vernon Association, 2000), ii. General Powell wrote the forward to this book.

No general in American history has surpassed and probably none has matched the care and thought which Washington gave to his intelligence service. He was forever seeking out sources of information and good spies, he wove networks of spies through the countryside, he diligently sought and studied maps, and he acted as his own chief intelligence officer, personally digesting the reports that came to his headquarters.<sup>17</sup>

This detailed study and consideration of all the factors allowed Washington to manipulate the circumstances and utilize his precious resources in the most efficient way.

### **Conclusion**

Washington's leadership compares well to the developed model. He showed considerable talent in all tenets of leadership and the ability to balance these to the prevailing circumstances. Undoubtedly courageous, he used his physical bravery as a beacon of example to his troops. Although this could be criticized as potentially inappropriate for a Commander-in-Chief in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, he only did so when the situation was critical and when he believed the power of his personality could make a difference. Equally, his moral courage was evident from the outset, where his conviction was such that he was prepared to risk all and take military command of what then was a poorly organized insurrection. With regard to his judgment, Washington showed true genius. He quickly recognized the importance of the Continental Army at all three levels of war, and furthermore developed a national defensive military strategy which would preserve it and therefore keep the revolution alive. To achieve this required considerable determination and, on occasions such as the winter campaign of 1776-1777, it was Washington's determination alone that kept the cause alive. Throughout all the trials and tribulations of the war years, and despite the tremendous power Washington wielded, he maintained his integrity and any minor lapses merely showed him to be human rather than a serious leadership flaw. Although he held

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<sup>17</sup> Weigley, The American Way of War, 16.

such power, Washington held a vivid view of what the new republic should be. He was thus careful to ensure that the military remained subservient to the legislative for fear of creating what he so despised. With regard to luck, Washington constantly used all his guile and cunning to assimilate as much information on the enemy and terrain as possible. This he applied to his experience turning his weaknesses into strengths, and by utilizing his limited resources to best effect he negated British materiel advantage and eroded their will. Washington was truly an exceptional leader.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **The Leadership of Sir William Howe**

*Had Sir William fortified the hills around Boston he could not have been disgracefully driven from it; had he pursued his victory at Long Island he had ended the rebellion; had he landed above the lines at New York not a man could have escaped him; had he cooperated with the Northern Army he had saved it, or had he gone to Philadelphia by land he had ruined Mr. Washington and his forces; but as he did none of these things, had he gone to the Devil before he was sent to America, it had been the saving of infamy and indelible dishonour to his country<sup>1</sup>*  
(Sir Henry Clinton papers)

The words of Sir Henry Clinton, who succeeded Sir William Howe as Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in America in May 1778, describes Howe's period of command as a catalogue of limited and underdeveloped successes coupled with failures illustrating poor military leadership. Howe had been personally selected by King George III to lead the largest army the British empire had deployed to date. At the time, factors such as family background and social standing could influence promotion within the military with this as a basic background, was Howe's leadership ability appropriate for the task?

### **Early Life**

Sir William Howe's early life was in many respects typical of a senior British officer of the day.<sup>2</sup> He was born into the aristocracy and received an excellent education at Eton prior to entering military service at the age of seventeen as a cornet in the Duke of Cumberland's Light Dragoons. During his military service he held a number of regimental positions and gained considerable experience in North America and on the mainland Europe. Of note was his involvement during the French and Indian War at the siege of Quebec where he commanded the

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Billias, Washington's Generals and Opponents (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 62. Citation includes original verbage.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Manners Chichester, "Howe" Dictionary of National Biography, Volume X (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973), 102-105. This provides a short biographical essay of Howe's life.



first element of the assault which forced the path onto the heights of the plains of Abraham thus facilitating the city's subsequent capture. During this period, Howe undoubtedly gained experience of the demography and topography of North America. He also held the Americans in high regard, particularly as his brother had been killed at Fort Ticonderoga early in the conflict and the people of Massachusetts mourned his loss and paid for a monument to his memory in Westminster Abbey. After his brother's death, Howe replaced him as the Member of Parliament for Nottingham where he actively opposed the British coercive policy to the colonies and publicly stated that he would not serve against the colonists.<sup>3</sup> These words became hollow when in May 1775 he arrived in Boston as the senior general of the reinforcements sent from Britain to support the then Commander-in-Chief, Sir Thomas Gage. Sir William Howe then replaced Gage as on 10 Oct 1775, a position he held until the acceptance of his resignation in May 1778. Of note is that while he commanded the land forces, his brother Admiral Lord Howe commanded the naval forces. Although this might be an advantage, ultimately there was no overall commander of the British forces in North America.

### **Courage**

Soon after his arrival in the colonies, Howe's physical courage was very much in evidence. Already famed for his bravery at Quebec, it was Howe, with the light infantry, that led the right flank at the battle of Bunker Hill on 17 June 1775. Although not yet Commander-in-Chief, Howe was intimately involved in the planning and execution of the battle in which the British were determined to show the discipline and bravery of their soldiers by conducting a frontal assault against the colonials prepared emplacements. Although ultimately successful, the decision exacted a heavy toll and over one thousand of Howe's men (40% of his force) were

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<sup>3</sup> Ira D Gruber, The Howe Brothers, (New York: The Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, 1972), 58.

either killed or wounded. It was in fact repulsed three times before finally overrunning the continental positions, albeit that this was partially due to the defenders exhausting their ammunition. Throughout, Howe's bravery was conspicuous, and at one point "for some seconds was left alone on the fiery slope every officer and man near him having been shot down."<sup>4</sup> This early example of Howe's physical bravery during the conflict is unique in that it is the only engagement in which he was not Commander-in-Chief. Subsequent acts of bravery whilst in command are less obvious and perhaps rightly so due to his position and the escalation of the war.

Howe's moral courage during his period in command is difficult to discern. The best example, and perhaps the root cause of his vacillations throughout the subsequent years, was his initial view that he did not want a command in the colonies as it could mean fighting against the very people he had fought alongside during the French and Indian war, whose ties with Britain had been so strong, and his initial reservations about government policy towards them. He of course did not have the courage to act on his words, but whether this was for fear of missing an opportunity for advancement or due to a greater loyalty to the crown is not clear. Such a change in position does, however, indicate that Howe was not acting with complete conviction in the fight against the colonies.

### **Judgment**

Howe's judgment throughout his time in command was undoubtedly effected by his experiences at Bunker Hill, where despite the British victory, considerable casualties had been incurred. This manifested itself in a ponderous approach to subsequent operations and in the campaigns in the form of deliberate pre-planned battles once the appropriate forces were in

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<sup>4</sup> "Howe", Dictionary of National Biography, Volume X (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 103.

place. Despite his previous experience in America, Howe opted to wage a European style of campaigning despite the fact that it did not lend itself to the prevailing circumstances, particularly in the pursuit of a fleeing foe. At the tactical level this did produce considerable success with well-coordinated attacks such as the flanking movements of Long Island and White Plains.<sup>5</sup> However, such victories amounted to little as Howe completely failed to turn his tactical victories into operational successes so as to achieve British objectives in the war. After all the major battles of 1776 and 1777, Long Island, White Plains, Brandywine, and Germantown, opportunity existed to maintain the initiative, focus on Washington's army, and destroy it once and for all.<sup>6</sup> In justification of his methodical approach, it is clear that Howe fully understood the implication of waging war at the end of a three thousand mile re-supply route down which every soldier, musket, and ball must travel. Furthermore, Howe recognized that a mistake leading to materiel loss could lose the initiative for up to a year. Troyer Anderson, in The Command of the Howe Brothers, when discussing the possibility of decisive victory wrote that:

If the drive fell short of annihilating the American army it might leave the British so exhausted as to imperil the results already won. An offensive at all costs is likely to be expensive. If the British closed a headlong campaign without complete success and with their forces badly worn and diminished by the strain of constant action, the following campaign might find the Americans with their ranks replenished and the British without reinforcements from home sufficient to compensate for the loss of the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the failure to turn tactical gains into operational success, it is perhaps Howe's strategic judgment where he was weakest. Although he appeared to recognize early in his tenure that defeat of Washington's army was the key to overall victory, once a suitable opportunity in the form of an army-to-army engagement was not forthcoming his strategy began

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<sup>5</sup> Craig L Symonds, Battlefield Atlas of the American Revolution, (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company, 1986), 27-29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 27-29 and 53-57.

<sup>7</sup> Troyer S Anderson, The Command of the Howe Brothers, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 15.

to vacillate. In the lull between the British campaigns of 1776 and 1777, during a period of four months Howe sent Lord Germain, the Secretary for the Colonies, four separate plans-three of which varied greatly.<sup>8</sup>

The British command structure of the time compounded the problem. Lord Germain in London had met with Major General John Burgoyne and developed a plan to send an army south from Canada on a route down the Champlain/Hudson valley and to link up with Howe's army operating north from New York in the area of Albany. Although aware of this plan in outline, Howe's proposed campaign for 1777 was focused on the conquest of territory rather than the destruction of Washington's army. Specifically, he focused his attention towards Philadelphia as he viewed the home of the Second Continental Congress and largest city in the colonies as a capital city in a European sense. Howe believed the capture of the city would inflict significant damage on the revolutionary cause, which later proved not to be the case. This plan was also approved by Lord Germain on the provision that its completion would be timely enough to allow support to Burgoyne's advance which was to be the main focus for the operation of 1777. An attempt at coordination had taken place but was very loose, and the ineffective effort allowed both Burgoyne and Howe to work autonomously. Although a considerable amount of the blame for poor coordination should rest with Germain, Howe knew of Burgoyne's plan and that its objective was to advance into his area of responsibility, therefore a level of coordination and support should have been provided by Howe.

### **Determination**

Howe's determination to prosecute the military campaign vacillated in much the same way as his strategy. His changes to the focus of his operations meant that any gains in one area

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<sup>8</sup> Richard M. Ketchum, Saratoga (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997). Chapter 4, 'To effect a junction with Howe', highlights the confused planning for the campaign of 1777.

were soon nullified by a change in strategic direction. Furthermore, and despite his previous experience of colonial warfare, he reverted to a European style of warfare inappropriate to the circumstances. Billias has stated, “ His movements were incredibly slow and ponderous; his tactics were timorous, unimaginative, and predictable; and his strategy was based on no clear conception of the how the war was to be won.”<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the wars prosecution showed little determination during the years of Howe’s tenure. During the campaign of 1777, the focus of effort endorsed by Lord Germain was a severing of New England from New York and other colonies by the advance down the Hudson by Burgoyne’s northern army “in order to effect a junction” with Howe. Upon such a junction, the northern army would be subsumed into Howe’s forces, which would have been a considerable enhancement to his combat power and another maneuver element with which to potentially engage and destroy Washington’s army. Notwithstanding this, Howe continued in the prosecution of his Pennsylvania campaign, allowing little support to go north and thereby assigning the northern army to its fate – its surrender at Saratoga.

### **Integrity**

This failure to support the northern army showed considerable lack of integrity on Howe’s part. He later defended his action during the parliamentary inquiry of 1779, stating that the best way for him to support Burgoyne was to prosecute a campaign to threaten Philadelphia and thereby force Washington’s army to defend to the south and thus prevent him from supporting the continental forces in the north. Although this argument is plausible, there is no doubt an element of Howe’s actions that were that of a slighted commander. As Troyer Anderson has written:

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<sup>9</sup> Billias, Washington’s Generals and Opponents, 64.

Sir William wrote a little like a man with an unwelcome servant forced upon him, whom he was obliged to keep busy but for whose services he felt no enthusiasm. Such subtle points are incapable of proof, but one cannot escape the suspicion that Howe felt that the Northern expedition was Burgoyne's private show; that in order to support it, the government had curtailed the reinforcement to the army in New York and hence diminished the prospects of the its commander. Consequently Howe may have been more ready than he might of otherwise have been to ignore Burgoyne and postpone the junction with him until after the completion of his own plans.<sup>10</sup>

Howe, had not been intimately involved with planning the operation as it had an independent commander in Burgoyne; furthermore, he would start his advance from another geographic command area in the form of Sir Guy Carleton's Canada. He was however certainly aware of the plan and his support had been loosely coordinated by Germain but Howe's actions showed that his focus was always towards Pennsylvania. On receiving word that the advance of Burgoyne had faltered, he did authorize Clinton in New York to move north. Such authorization came too late and, furthermore, he had denuded Clinton's force so greatly that the latter barely had enough troops to garrison his own area of responsibility; thus, the force that was sent north had little effect.

A further example of Howe's lack of integrity was the personal example he displayed, particularly during the winter months. Rather than spending the time preparing for the next campaign, he was "accused of having set an evil example to his officers of dissipation and high play."<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly such an example had a ripple effect throughout his command and was unlikely to engender local support.

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *The Command of the Howe Brothers*, 260

<sup>11</sup> "Howe", *Dictionary of National Biography*, 103.

## Vision

Notwithstanding some of Howe's weaknesses as a commander, with such a powerful force and a preconceived vision for the outcome of the campaign surely victory could still be attained? In 1775 when Howe landed in Boston, he was subordinate to Sir Thomas Gage who was waging a campaign of diplomatic conciliation backed by force. By default, when Howe succeeded Gage such methods were continued. Furthermore, Sir William Howe, and his brother, Admiral Lord Richard Howe, were in 1776 appointed a commission empowering them to negotiate with the rebels. There is also some evidence, even prior to his arrival in 1775, that "he believed his task would be one primarily of negotiation."<sup>12</sup>

Howe was therefore placed in the difficult position of waging war whilst attempting to negotiate a peace. This may partly explain his failure to envelop and destroy Washington's army at Long Island early in his tenure, although had he done so his bargaining position would no doubt have been far stronger. The situation in which he was to both conquer and pacify appears to have made him uncertain what method of coercion to take. One of the fundamental problems was Howe's (and the British government's) assumption that the colonies contained a loyalist majority who, with support, would rise and quash the rebel minority. Billias has stated states, "the main function of the British army, as Howe conceived it, was to make a demonstration over a wide area in order to encourage the loyalists and to persuade the rebels of the futility of further resistance."<sup>13</sup> Quite simply the loyalist allegiance of the population of the colonies was not as great as believed and therefore Howe's vision for the management of the campaign was flawed.

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, The Command of the Howe Brothers, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Billias, Washington's Generals and Opponents, 66.

## **Luck**

Howe was not an individual who used his abilities to develop favorable circumstances. Ponderous in his thoughts and actions, he failed to take the initiative and frequently gave it away. His operation in 1777 to Pennsylvania placed him at sea for six weeks due to unfavorable winds. As Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in the thirteen colonies, he had placed himself in a position where he was unable to receive the information that would allow him to react to any developing situation. Furthermore, all this was to cover a distance which his professional army could have marched in one week.

Despite commanding the largest army the British had ever deployed overseas, he constantly requested more forces and resources at a time when the government perceived a threat from mainland Europe. This meant that his requests were unlikely to be met. His rationale was one of applying overwhelming force to what in essence was a political problem, and he showed limited imagination for developing a style of warfare appropriate to the circumstances. Despite having been tasked before the war with developing a less conventional form of warfare with lighter formations and faster drill, he failed to embrace practices outside the convention. One missed opportunity was that of the “Ferguson Rifle” developed by Major Patrick Ferguson; This prototype breech loading weapon had a range and accuracy equal to the frontiersmen’s rifles and a far greater rate of fire. The weapon did not impress Howe and only about 200 were manufactured, typifying his reliance on the conventional military thought of the time. Ultimately, Howe had a painfully slow approach that could not take advantage of fleeting opportunities even if he had wished to.



## **Conclusion**

Howe's leadership does not compare well to the developed model. In the majority of tenets he showed fundamental flaws, albeit some aspects of which were influenced by incompetent leadership in Britain. An individual of unquestionable physical courage, he failed to use this as a leadership tool post Bunker Hill. Yet it would probably have had a considerable effect on fatigued redcoat ranks at critical moments when Washington's army was within his grasp. His moral courage for his position is questionable. He had spoken out against the coercion of the colonies prior to the war, and had affection for them after the events of the French and Indian War. His judgment at the tactical level was good, but he failed to develop a focussed operational and strategic campaign, which meant that tactical benefits were lost. The lack of a focused overarching plan meant that its prosecution lacked a determined approach with disparate and uncoordinated campaigns occurring within his area of responsibility. His integrity during the period is also questionable, having failed to support Burgoyne's actions to the north while overindulging and socializing in Philadelphia when his thoughts should have been directed to the defeat of the continentals. His difficult position was of course compounded by both his military and diplomatic roles, but failed to pursue either course vigorously. He demonstrated no vision for the future. This lack of vigor meant he consistently lost the initiative and was unable to develop opportunities as they arose.

Howe was dispatched to the colonies because he was a man of talent and proven leadership ability. On arrival, and particularly after his appointment as Commander-in Chief, he consistently demonstrated weak leadership which set the tone for the poor prosecution of the entire campaign and helped Britain lose the war.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Leadership Compared**

*Any other General in the world than General Howe would have beaten General Washington, and any other General in the world than General Washington would have beaten General Howe<sup>1</sup>*  
(London Newspaper August 1778)

An anonymous correspondent of a London newspaper wrote the above soon after the indecisive battle of Germantown. Although it may have captured the common British view of the moment, it belittles two commanders who were waging a complicated war. Washington's and Howe's appointment's to be Commanders-in-Chief of their respective armies is testament enough that these were talented men. Having related their leadership abilities to the developed model, Washington consistently displayed the stronger attributes. It is, however, not just the presence of a certain tenet that makes the great leader, but their collective balance in relation to the prevailing circumstance which determines success or failure.

### **Courage**

That both men were physically brave there is no doubt. Both had proven themselves before the war and during its early battles. Howe's physical bravery did, however, become less evident after his appointment as commander, whereas Washington's bravery continued to be seen. This is not a criticism of either commander, more an observation that Howe adopted the more traditional role of the commander as the battle manager who placed himself where he could best observe and direct the action at an operational level. Washington also fulfilled this function, however on occasion he also moved himself to a position on the tactical battlefield where he could have a more direct effect such as at Long Island and Princeton. Although placing himself at great risk during such actions, Washington acted out of necessity, particularly at Princeton

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<sup>1</sup> Billias, Washington's Generals and Opponents, 61.

where his under resourced army desperately needed a victory. He clearly understood that by his presence he could imbue fighting spirit into the continental ranks. Although Howe had done the same whilst leading the right flank at Bunker Hill, he does not appear to have done so whilst serving as Commander-in-Chief. This is certainly not to advocate that a commander should at all times lead from the front, but imagine for instance the turn of events if Howe had personally rallied his forward units on Brooklyn Heights on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1776. Had Howe used his personal leadership to press his advantage “his chances of overrunning the Brooklyn defenders would have been excellent considering their disorganized state.”<sup>2</sup>

This reticence for dynamic physical personal leadership is undoubtedly linked to Howe’s lack of moral courage and conviction of his role. His statement to his constituents in Nottingham, the memory of the kindness shown after his brother’s death, and his fighting alongside the Americans during the French and Indian War, all combined in a manner that affected his complete conviction to crush the revolution. Furthermore, his role as Special Commissioner with its political dimension as peacemaker served to confuse the situation further.

Washington had no such distractions. He courted the position of commander. From the first day of his appointment to the last, he clearly understood that his primary function was to keep his army in being and attrite through erosion of his will, if not decisively defeat the British at every opportunity particularly especially at the strategy and policy level of war.

### **Judgment**

Differences in how the commanders applied their judgment also exist. At the tactical level, Howe continually had the upper hand with his slow and deliberate methods of building resources prior to applying overwhelming force. The value of these tactical gains were, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Higinbotham, The War of American Independence, 158.

lost due to a limited operational focus. From the outset, Howe should have centered his efforts to destroy Washington's field army but continually failed to do so. Early in his appointment as commander he does appear to have recognized this need but failed to align his methods accordingly. Initially, he did not seize the opportunity that existed prior to the evacuation of Boston where he still had a powerful army with the newly formed and poorly organized continental army close by. This missed opportunity was recognized by Washington, who stated "I must question whether a case similar to ours is to be found: to wit, to maintain a post against the flower of the British troops for six months together..... and at the end of them to have one army disbanded and another to raise within the same distance of the reinforced enemy."<sup>3</sup>

At New York the opportunity again existed to envelop and destroy Washington's army. In addition, Howe could have engineered further opportunities if he had conducted a relentless pursuit of Washington prior to the latter crossing the Delaware. As much as Howe failed to recognize that the quick destruction of Washington's army should have been the focus of his operational planning, Washington certainly recognized that the maintenance of the Continental Army was his. The colonial commander understood that there would be no quick victory, therefore a standing army was necessary to sustain the revolutionary cause over time. Furthermore, he recognized that to maintain his army he must avoid, where possible, full engagements with the British army which he succeeded in doing. Russel F. Weigley in an essay on "American Strategy" stated that Washington "found that committing his troops to battle was an invitation to defeat. Therefore as the defense of New York City in 1776, there was only one

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<sup>3</sup> Billias, Washington's Generals and Opponents, 48.

more collision between the main bodies of the rival armies, along Brandywine Creek near Philadelphia on 11 September 1777.”<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the battle of Brandywine Creek, Washington rigidly adhered to this strategic defensive strategy throughout the war. Howe, however, having failed to defeat Washington’s army, changed his strategy to one of capturing territory and attempting to initiate a loyalist uprising. In a country so vast, and with the basic false assumptions as to the size and location of loyalist support, this strategy proved impossible to implement. If such strategy were to be successful, the best approach would have been the planned goals of the 1777 campaign, namely to work in conjunction with Burgoyne and separate New England from the rest of the rebellion. Howe, however, assumed another course and prosecuted his unwieldy campaign into Pennsylvania and failed to muster loyalist support in such places as New Jersey.

Ultimately Howe failed to identify a coherent strategy which could be prosecuted with vigor at all three levels of war. Washington did develop such a strategy, and maintained it throughout the war and provided the focus of the continental effort.

### **Determination**

Washington showed far greater determination than Howe in the prosecution of the campaigns, and the actions of the two commanders during the winter months of 1775 and 1776 provide a good insight into this. Billias wrote that “Howe closed his mind to the soldiering until spring. The fact that the Americans did not share this attitude was shown when Arnold assaulted the fortress of Quebec in a blinding snowstorm in December 1775. It was demonstrated still more strikingly a year later by Washington’s daring riposte at Trenton.”<sup>5</sup> That the winters were

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<sup>4</sup> Russel F. Weigley “American Strategy from its beginning through the First World War,” Peter Paret, editor, The Makers of Modern Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 411.

<sup>5</sup> Billias, Washington’s Generals and Opponents, 49.

harsh there is no question, but the adverse weather had a degrading effect on both armies and the fact that the continentals were more used to such conditions does little to explain the lack of determination by Howe to conduct some form of offensive action during these cold months. Although at the time winter campaigning was not generally conducted in seasonal climates, Howe showed a marked inability to adapt. Particularly inexcusable was his failure to attack Washington's starving army as it suffered in its winter quarters at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777/1778. Howe's well supported force was garrisoned in Philadelphia less than a day's march from Washington. The continental army was poorly resourced and unlikely to move, and yet Howe did nothing.

### **Integrity**

The actions of the commanders during the winter months also provide a good insight into their integrity. Washington from the day of his appointment to that of his resignation remained with his army enduring the same discomfort and hardships. Howe too remained with his army, but because he refused to conduct winter campaign, he garrisoned them in the larger cities whilst he enjoyed a high standard of living with many social engagements.

Howe's lack of integrity can also be seen at the strategic level, particularly in his actions during 1777 and the defeat of Burgoyne's army at Saratoga. Notwithstanding the confused planning for this expedition, even if Howe did not believe that he was to provide a large amount of support he certainly did understand that some support would be provided, and such would come from Sir Henry Clinton's garrison in New York. Although this may have been his intention at the start of the year, as his Pennsylvania expedition progressed he continually drew on Clinton's forces for reinforcements and resources. This occurred to such an extent that Clinton could no longer viably support Burgoyne. From Howe's perspective, the actions of his

force were all that was important even if that meant placing other British forces in jeopardy. Washington did not view his force in the same way, and recognizing the importance of the actions in the north released some of his own troops to move North while accepting that this made him more vulnerable.

### **Vision**

Washington's vision was always one of the military victory from which an independent republic would be formed. Throughout the course of the war, enormous questions remained unanswered such as how the thirteen colonies would combine to form such a state, who would be its international allies, with who would it trade, and would relations still exist with Britain? Washington, however, did not allow himself to get distracted by such issues. He was quite clear that the principle task was to secure military victory, after which other subjects could be fully addressed. Washington as the military commander focussed on the martial aspect of the rebellion and left the higher policy and political matters to others.

Howe was not so decisive. As a military commander he wanted to concentrate on fighting the war, but his special commission as a peace negotiator meant that he also needed to pursue peace. Furthermore, he failed to recognize that were Washington's army destroyed he would be in a far stronger negotiating position. To marry the two tasks of war maker and peacemaker, Howe tended towards the show of force rather than its decisive application. In September 1776, Howe wrote to Germain stating, "Though the enemy is much dispirited from the late successes of His Majesty's arms, yet I have not the smallest prospect of finishing this contest this [1776] campaign, nor until the rebels see preparation in the spring that may preclude thoughts of further resistance."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Don Cook, The Long Fuse-How England Lost the American Colonies 1760 -1785 (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 259.



Clearly Howe believed that a show of overwhelming force was the approach to take, and by adopting such an approach he played into the hands of Washington who wished to avoid decisive engagement where possible.

### **Luck**

The manipulating of circumstances and information to create an advantage was consistently better achieved by Washington than Howe. Washington's plans were based on reliable information and he spent a considerable amount of time and resources in ensuring he had gathered enough from which to develop them accordingly. He constantly considered Howe's position and what the British commander might do next, and was vexed and concerned when he could not. In addition, the American commander exhaustively studied the geography of potential battlefields to guard against envelopment after having learnt his lesson at New York in 1776. This combination allowed Washington to continually slip away from the clutches of the British and, although due in part to Howe's pedantic approach, his ability to elude envelopment was also due to his careful study of the situation.

Unlike Washington, Howe's plans were based more on assumptions than information and frequently these assumptions proved to be wrong. In general they were based on applying European precedent such as an inability to conduct winter campaigns, or that Philadelphia, as the capital, was of strategic importance. In addition to his own assumptions, Howe also acted on those from London, particularly the belief that the colonies contained a loyalist majority that would rise to defeat the continentals if supported by a British force.

When Howe's assumptions were not validated such as at Philadelphia, he tended to revert to conventional military thinking and methods that did not suit the circumstances. Troyer Anderson wrote:

But the unusual situation that faced him, if to one type of mind it might have suggested a departure from the rule, to another would have suggested strict adherence to convention as probably the safest path through the maze of difficulty too complex for precise survey. A reading of Sir William Howe's dispatches leaves the impression that his mind took the latter path. The tremendous responsibility with which he was entrusted seemed to accentuate this trend. Howe seems to have felt that if he followed the conventional rules and then failed, he could say in his own defense that he observed the best-accepted practice.<sup>7</sup>

That Washington was prepared to deviate from what could be considered conventional practice and that Howe was not meant one thing: the circumstantial advantage often rested with the continentals despite the materiel advantages Britain brought to the fight.

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, The Command of the Howe Brothers, 259.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Conclusion**

Leadership has a number of enduring tenets, which must be harmoniously interrelated and weighted so that they are appropriate to the prevailing circumstances. Both Washington and Howe had proven abilities as leaders: Washington as a politician with military experience from his militia service, and Howe as a professional officer with experience as a Member of Parliament. When appointed to be Commanders-in-Chief, they were elevated to a position where their decisions would have a considerable effect on the outcome of the war in which they were engaged. Washington appeared to blossom in this situation, whereas Howe failed to perform well. Washington's conviction that the revolutionary cause was right, and would prevail, differed greatly from Howe's reticence to fight a people whom he knew, had respected his brother, with whom he had fought, and in a conflict that he believed could be ended through negotiation.

This difference had a huge ripple effect through the other tenets of leadership. Washington's tactical judgment was no match for Howe, and was compounded by his limited resources. To counter this, he quickly recognized the need to develop a standing army, and defensive military strategy to sustain the fight and the revolutionary cause while ensuring his army survived. Howe's judgment failed to mature above the tactical level, and he believed a series of small victories would eventually lead to capitulation and negotiation by the continentals. Ironically, this might have occurred if he had destroyed Washington's force. Although he recognised the importance of Washington's army, he failed to prosecute aggressive, focussed, operational, and strategic plans for its defeat. Howe's lack of focus manifested itself in the campaigns of 1776 and 1777 being prosecuted with limited determination, and in which the slightest set back would force a change in operational or strategic direction. Washington,

however, never wavered, and his tenacity in maintaining his army in the field and preserving his defensive strategy was considerable. Howe, despite having command of all the land forces in the colonies, became focussed on the actions of his army. He failed to relate this to the strategic picture and was especially remiss in failing to support Burgoyne. Washington showed no such lack of integrity. He both considered and acted on the strategic stage, even when this meant weakening his own army's capability such as sending reinforcements north to help counter Burgoyne.

Washington's vision was always one of military victory followed by the establishment of a free and fair republic. Howe was less clear and shackled by his dual role as military commander and peace commissioner. This manifested itself in neither a focus for military victory nor a negotiated settlement, but rather an artificial separation of the two. This meant that his plans lacked the vigor necessary for success. When faced with failure, Howe reverted to the conventional military thought of the day and thus he failed to capitalize on his success. Washington conversely studied in detail all the factors of the conflict, which allowed him to use his limited resources in the most efficient way and evade the more conventional and narrowly focussed British commander. This understanding meant that he was not drawn into army versus army battles, which he surely would have lost.

Washington was an exceptional commander whose personal leadership did much to maintain the revolutionary cause through the first few years of the war. Howe, was obviously less successful, and by the weakness of his command he lost the opportunity for a British quick and decisive victory. In the end, for the British commander his leadership skills were not enough to succeed in the complex situation he found himself and against a most talented and clearly focussed foe who could and did fight the war on all three levels of conflict.



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